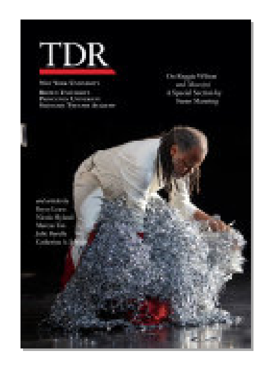


Digital Zapatistas

Jill Lane



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Lines of Flight

Critic Paul Virilio suggests that our new times are marked by the "industrialization of simulation": dominated by commercial and government interests, televisual and internet cybermedia perpetuate a "dissuasion of perceptible reality," and—for better or worse—instantiate new formations of reality, new relations between self, space, and a sense of the real, whose moving contours require new conceptual maps (Virilio 1995:141). As with all space exploration, real or imagined, the cartography of such simulated spaces—or of what Virilio calls "cybernetic space-time"—is shaped both by the past travel and desired destination of the traveler. Ricardo Dominguez, founder of the Electronic Disturbance Theater (EDT), notes the range of metaphors that have until now informed our imagination of cybernetic space: "frontier, castle, real estate, rhizome, hive, matrix, virus, network" (Dominguez 1998a). Because cyberspace is by definition a discursive space, the imposition of any one metaphor has a performative effect on the cyber-reality it describes, turning cyberspace into the domain of private ownership, or frontier outposts, or rhizomatic community. "Each map," says Dominguez, "creates a different line of flight, a different form of security, and a different pocket of resistance" (Dominguez 1998a). Each map enables and effaces certain kinds of travel and their attendant social infrastructure: ports of entry and exit, laws of access, and rights of passage.

The maps that now govern our "globalized" world suggest a world in which public spaces are increasingly privatized, in which the poverty exacerbated by neocolonial and neoliberal economic practice pushes more and more people to migrate, only to find themselves criminalized as "illegal" aliens by those who guard "legitimate" access to nation-states. Shall such maps be reproduced in cyberspace? What recourse—what lines of flight, what type of travel, what practices of resistance—can be made in cyberspace for protest, justice, or alternative realities?

Performing Flight: Two Tales

On 3 January 2000, the Zapatista Air Force broke the sound barrier. Rumors spread that the Zapatista Air Force had bombarded the federal barracks of the Mexican Army: the Mexican soldiers stationed in Amador Hernandez, Chiapas, were confronted by hundreds of circling and swooping planes manned by the

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Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) or the Zapatista Army for National Liberation.

Did you say the Zapatista *Air Force*? The Zapatistas have airplanes?

Well, yes: paper airplanes. The Zapatista Air Force attacked the Federal soldiers with paper airplanes, which flew through and over the barbed wire of the military encampment, each carrying a discursive missile: messages and poems for the soldiers themselves. The daily "protest of the indigenous of this region against the military occupation of their lands on the outskirts of Montes Azules," said a report from Chiapas, "has sought in many ways to make itself heard by the troops, who appear to live on the other side of the sound barrier" (Nuevo Amanecer Press 2000). On 3 January, the Zapatista Air Force broke that sound barrier, making hundreds of flights. One letter-bomber flew through a dormitory window with the message: "Soldiers, we know that poverty has made you sell your lives and souls. I also am poor, as are millions. But you are worse off, for defending our exploiter" (Nuevo Amanecer Press 2000).

One year later, the Electronic Disturbance Theater had designed the flight plans for a companion digital Zapatista Air Force: the code for its "Zapatista Tribal Port Scan" (ZTPS) was released for public use on 3 January 2001. With this software, artists and activists could mount their own aerial attack on any web site—the U.S. government, or the Mexican military—sending thousands of messages through the "barbed wire" of ports open to the cyber network.[1] The messages sent by the digital activists were drawn from a fragmented, bilingual poem about the Zapatista struggle for peace with dignity in Chiapas:

> nightmare ends jungle waits silence breaks nuestra arma nuestra palabra [our weapon our word] Yepa! Yepa! Andale! Andale! Arriba! Arriba! Subcomandante Insurgente [...] power for Chiapas virtual autonomy real politics not over top down cracks open reality arcs No Illegals Mexico USA Operation Gatekeeper Border war Every hour Someone dies amor rabia [love rage]. (EDT 2001)

Fragments of the poem are sent with each port scan, so that the targeted system itself will log the text. Because a cyber-protest usually involves thousands—even hundreds of thousands—of participants, the system will begin to repeat and rewrite the poem at incredible speed, composing and recomposing the fragmented world of the Zapatistas in its very own system logs. Comparable to other forms of public protest and civil disobedience in public spaces off-line, this organized event takes place in the publicly accessible spaces of the Internet in order to register a huge collective, politicized presence in digital space.

The distance between the Zapatistas on the Amador Hernandez hillside and the digital Zapatistas writing political code may be bridged, I suggest, by understanding both as performances that combine political protest with conceptual art in an act of social revelation: both involve a simulation of flight and attack that reveals and reverses the logic of military and social domination. First, the simulation suggests a conflict between possible equals, an impossible fantasy in which the Zapatistas have an equipped air force with which to defend their land, or a fantasy in which a group of net.artists can face down the vast networks of the military. However, the act of simulation ultimately reveals the incommensurate force and aggression that underwrites the policies of the government and military; thousands of armed troops and real airplanes are dispatched to "fight" communities armed with little more than paper. While less dangerous in their confrontation, the digital Zapatistas' virtual protests most often reveal the ways in which cyberspace itself is occupied and organized as a commercial and private, rather than public,

space to be protected with the full force of the law, or of the military—as was the case in September 1998, when the Department of Defense attacked an Electronic Disturbance Theater server directly with what they called a "hostile applet" that crashed the activists' system during a virtual "sit-in" at that year's Ars Electronica Festival.[2]

Can we imagine such practices of simulation and critique as spatial practices? In the years just before the Internet was an everyday fixture in lives of millions, Edward Soja urged social theorists to understand the production of space in terms as material and dialectical as have long been applied by Marxist theory to notions of time. Spatiality, he argued, "is socially produced, and, like society itself, exists in both substantial forms (concrete spatialities) and as a set of relations between individuals and groups, an 'embodiment' and medium of social life itself" (1989:120). It is from this materialist perspective that we might understand Anne Balsamo's definition of cyberspace as "the space of the disembodied social in a hypertechnological informational society" (2000:97). Cyberspace can be understood, in other words, as a form of spatiality produced by material practices associated with information technologies (computers, fiberoptic networks, and so forth) and at the same time, produced by the social relations that shape and are shaped by such technologies to begin with. In Soja's terms, "social and spatial structures are dialectically intertwined in social life, not just mapped onto the other as categorical projections" (1989:127). Balsamo does not presume an ontological division between physical bodies or spaces and virtual experience, but rather, suggests that these very ontologies are socially produced through specific material relations and practices. Balsamo notes that enhanced visualization technologies—from ultrasound to medical imaging technologies—routinely challenge the assumed boundaries of the material body, blurring boundaries between bodily interior and exterior, depth and surface, and organic aura from mediated projection. In an insight particularly relevant to studies of performance and resonant with Soja, Balsamo argues that embodiment is *itself* an effect produced by the processes through which bodies are imagined and constituted. If embodiment is an effect, we can, she writes, "begin to ask questions about how the body is staged differently in different environments" (2000:98).

The pages that follow will suggest that the Electronic Disturbance Theater illuminates a new set of possibilities for understanding the relation between performance, embodiment, and spatial practice in cyberspace. Unlike a number of other performance artists who have explored the relation of the body to technology through the literal encounter of individual physical bodies to machines—Orlan's livecast surgeries; Stelarc's cybernetic experiments[3]—EDT, in turn, has placed the very notion of "embodiment" under rigorous question, and sought to understand the specific possibilities for constituting *presence* in digital space that is both *collective* and *politicized*. Can a collective social body materialize—make itself felt, register its effects—in electronic space? What practices would enable such a form of embodiment? Further, could such practices work toward refiguring the putative ontology of cyberspace itself, producing not only collective presence, but new forms of spatiality? Electronic Disturbance Theater has engaged such questions with a series of experimental actions, hybrid forms they have dubbed network_art_activism, whose signatures are collective participation, open source, and a creative embrace of the basic technologies of cyberspace: e-mail, elemental javascript, port scans. Those actions suggest that performance in cyberspace can reproduce—rehearse or practice—cyberspace in ways that produce of an alternate form of spatiality. For EDT, as for the Zapatistas, cyberspace can be practiced as a new public sphere, a runway for the staging of more productive "lines of flight" for those struggling for social change.

Electronic Disturbance Theater

Timeline 1994–2002

Ricardo Dominguez

This Electronic Disturbance Theater Timeline presents a selection of the events that led to a radical shift from the use of the Internet for communication and documentation to its use as a space for nonviolent, direct action. Here you will find URLs of notes, essays, software, newspaper reports, and critiques; from the rise of Digital Zapatismo in 1994 to post-9/11 net.actions. It was between these two points in time that the Electronic Disturbance Theater responded to a call by the communities in Chiapas, Mexico, to bear witness to the global condition of neoliberalism.

The Electronic Disturbance Theater (EDT) is a group of four net.artists and net.activists engaged in developing the theory and practice of Electronic Civil Disobedience (ECD). The group focused its electronic actions against the Mexican and U.S. governments to draw attention to the war being waged against the Zapatistas and others in Mexico since the start of 1998. The Electronic Disturbance Theater has been working at the intersections of radical politics, recombinant activism, performance art, and software design.

EDT has produced an ECD software tool called FloodNet to automate requests to a targeted webpage and, in so doing, disturb a website.

On 1 January 1999 EDT released the *Disturbance Developers Kit*, which led to the emergence of "International Hacktivism" around the world. Hacktivist groups at the end of 2002 were continuing to develop the practice of ECD as a digital presence against top-down globalization.

Electronic Disturbance Theater

Ricardo Dominguez
Carmin Karasic
Brett Stalbaum
Stefan Wray



Ricardo Dominguez in a performance of Tales of Mayan Technologies, *at the ROOT Annual Festival of Live and Time-Based Arts in Kingston Upon Hull, U.K., 15 February 2000. (Photo by Mark Harvey; courtesy of ID.8 Photography)*

"The battle between The Electronic Disturbance Theater and the Pentagon may go down in history as a defining moment."

—*Winn Schwartua*
CYBERSHOCK: *(Thunder's Mouth Press, 2000)*

1994
First Declaration of the La Realidad
the EZLN
http://www.ezln.org/documentos/1994/199312xx.en.htm
The Zapatistas and the Electronic Fabric of Struggle
Harry Cleaver
http://www.eco.utexas.edu/faculty/Cleaver/zaps.html
Run for the Border: The Taco Bell War
Ricardo Dominguez
http://www.ctheory.net/text_file.asp?pick=155

1995
Chiapas-95 Email List
www.eco.utexas.edu/faculty/Cleaver/chiapas95.html
Zapatistas: The Recombinant Movie
Ricardo Dominguez
http://www.ctheory.net
The Thing
Ricardo Dominguez, editor
http://bbs.thing.net

"Here in the Lacandona surplus flesh gnaws at the dreams of virtual capitalism."
—*Ricardo Dominguez*
"Run for The Border: The Taco Bell War" (<http://www.ctheory.net/text_file.asp?pick=155>, 1994)

1996
EZLN
http://www.ezln.org
Zapatista Net of Autonomy and Liberation
http://www.actlab.utexas.edu/~zapatistas/index.html
Zapatista Port Action at MIT
Ricardo Dominguez and Ron Rocco
http://www.artnetweb.com/port/grabs/rabi_screens.html

"human_rights.html not found on this .gov server."
—FloodNet *404 File ("File Not Found")*
Carmin Karasic and Brett Stalbaum (April 1998)

1997
Information Warfare in Mexico
Stefan Wray
http://www.nyu.edu/projects/wray/masters.html
Zapatista Net
Rebecca Vesely
http://www.wired.com/news/politics/0,1283,1823,00.html
The Acteal Massacre
http://www.wired.com/news/politics/0,1283,1823,00.html

"If The Electronic Disturbance Theater wasn't illegal it was certainly immoral [...]."
—*U.S. Defense Department*
New York Times *(3 October 1998)*

1998
Call for VR Sit-In on Five Mexican Financial Sites
http://www.nyu.edu/projects/wray/anondigcoal.html
FloodNet
Carmin Karasic and Brett Stalbaum
http://www.thing.net/~rdom/zapsTactical/foyer3.htm
Hacktivist
New York Times, Front Page
Amy Harmon
http://custwww.xensei.com/users/carmin/scrapbook/articles/nyt103198/31hack.html
Electronic Disturbance Theater's Battle with the Pentagon
http://www.thing.net/~rdom/ecd/inside.html

1999
Disturbance Developers Kit
http://www.thing.net/~rdom/ecd/floodnet.html
Culture Activists Defend Cyber Disobedience
Drew Clark
http://www.thing.net/~rdom/ecd/defend.html
Wired for War
(Time Magazine, 11 October, 154:15)
Tim McGirk
http://www.globalpolicy.org/globaliz/cvlsociety/zapatis.htm

"One of the most novel weapons in the Zapatistas' digital arsenal is the Electronic Disturbance Theater."
—*Tim McGirk*
Time *(11 October 1999)*

2000
Cyberterrorism
Dr. Dorothy E. Denning
http://www.terrorism.com/
Hactivism in the Cyberstreets
David Cassel
http://www.alternet.org
Hacktivism Credited to Zapatistas
http://www.thing.net/~diane/ecd/ZapsFirst.html

"The most striking thing about the Electronic Disturbance Theater is its potential as an unheard of writing machine: it literally dispatches from the future."
—*Jon McKenzie*
*"!nt3rhackt!v!ty" (*Style *30:2, 1999)*

2001
ZAPATISTA TRIBAL PORT SCAN (ZTPS)
source code distribution
http://www.thing.net/~diane/ecd/ztps.html
THE HACKTIVIST E-ZINE
http://www.thehacktivist.com
FTAA: ONLINE ACTION
EDT, Electrohippies, and The Hackitivist
http://thehacktivist.com/a20/
ONLINE DEMONSTRATION AGAINST LUFTHANSA
http://go.to/online-demo

2002
E-PROTEST FOR LABOR AND INDIGENOUS RIGHTS IN MEXICO
Sponsored by Harvard Law School
http://www.thing.net/~rdom/ecd/NOPPPCalls.html
ACTIONS FOR THE WOMEN MURDERED IN CIUDAD JUAREZ, MEXICO
The Women in Black, Coco Fusco, and EDT
http://www.thing.net/~rdom/ecd/JuarezCall.html
HACKTIVISTS OR CYBERTERRORISTS?
Sandor Vegh
http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue7_10/vegh/index.html

Geographies of Power

In his trajectory as an artist and activist, Ricardo Dominguez has held an ongoing commitment to developing what he calls "disturbance spaces" through gestures which "can be amplified by ubiquitous technologies"—whether the traditional theatre, visual art, or digital performance (in Marketou 2002). As a founding member of the acclaimed art collective Critical Art Ensemble (CAE), Dominguez helped articulate a critique of traditional civil disobedience and called for new forms of "electronic disturbance," in a book of that title published in 1994. In their analysis of the contemporary representation of power, CAE claims that subversive or oppositional art is now obsolete. Contemporary globalization—as we know—has been marked by ever more complex, asymmetrical transnational flows of capital, goods, labor, information, and peoples; marked by the corrosion and decentering of previously stable categories of national-ethnic identities in the West. In this context, CAE reverses the familiar Deluzian figuration which sees the nomad as the site of the Other, and instead insists that it is now *power* which is nomadic, rendering our social condition "liquescent." The only viable avenue for oppositional practice is to produce calculated "disturbance" in the rhizomatic or "liquid" networks of power itself. This critique resonates with Zygmunt Bauman's understanding of our present state of "liquid modernity," in his book of that title (2000) and Arjun Appadurai's notion that current cultural flows happen in the shifting disjunctures between fluid social landscapes—part material, part imagined—of technology, media, ethnicity, ideology, and finance (1996). For CAE, elite power has abandoned territorial bases and their former "architectural monuments of power"—the courthouse, the statehouse, the street, and the theatre. The new geography, they say, "is a virtual geography, and the core of political and cultural resistance must assert itself in this electronic space." (CAE 1994:12, 23, 57–58). In a later writing, Dominguez qualifies that the "liquid" flows of "Virtual Capital are still unidirectional [...]: take from the South and keep it in the North; IMF growing and Argentina dying; Chiapas asking for democracy and NAFTA deleting democracy" (in Marketou 2002). In response, CAE has developed what they call "Recombinant Theatre," a practice that works in dynamic relation between the organic and virtual, moving in the various electronic networks where elite power actually resides.

Ricardo Dominguez offered a different response, leaving Critical Art Ensemble in 1995 to begin a lengthy training in what were then relatively new and rapidly

expanding internet technologies, in order to extend this critique into a more concrete electronic practice. Born in Las Vegas to Mexican parents, and originally trained as a theatre actor, Dominguez situated himself in the tradition of materialist critique through theatre which included Bertolt Brecht, the Marxist Brazilian director Augusto Boal, and the Teatro Campesino's agit prop theatre in support of Cesar Chávez and the United Farm Workers Union strike in California in 1962. Dominguez sought to translate these social aesthetics for a digital stage. While these figures were inspirations, it was the Zapatista rebellion in Chiapas, Mexico, that ultimately provided the impetus for the formation of the Electronic Disturbance Theater, which Dominguez founded with collaborators Stefan Wray, Carmin Karasic, and Brett Stalbaum in early 1998. The practices of EDT not only support and extend the cause of the Zapatistas, but can be seen as an effort to reconcile CAE's theory of electronic civil disobedience with the challenges posed to such a theory by the Zapatista uprising itself.

The Zapatista rebellion—staged in the early hours of 1 January 1994 on the day NAFTA went into effect—both engaged and challenged these critiques of "revolutionary" activism. On the one hand, the movement revitalized abandoned notions of "traditional" civil disobedience and uprising on behalf of indigenous peoples; the long Zapatista march to the seat of government in Mexico City in January 2001 demonstrates the continued support and impact these "traditional" tactics continue to have.[4] Further, the particularly theatrical character of their actions, specifically those of Subcommandante Marcos, earned the Zapatista leader the name "subcomandante of performance" by artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña. "The war was carried on as if it were a performance," wrote Gómez-Peña. "Most of the Zapatistas, indigenous men, women and children, wore *pasamontañas* [black ski masks]. Some utilized wooden rifles as mere props." Wearing a "collage of 20th-century revolutionary symbols, costumes and props borrowed from Zapata, Sandino, Che, and Arafat," Marcos became "the latest popular hero in a noble tradition of activists [...] who have utilized performance and media strategies to enter in the political 'wrestling arena' of contemporary Mexico" (Gómez-Peña 1995:90–91).

1. Subcommandante Marcos smoking his famous pipe in Mexico City, D.F., March 2001. (Courtesy of Centro de Medios Independietes, Chiapas)



While the Zapatistas thus made tactical use of embodied—and theatricalized—presence, the movement also took advantage, from the beginning, of the Internet as a means to build a global grassroots support network. Dominguez describes this "digital zapatismo" as a "polyspatial movement for a radical democracy based on Mayan legacies of dialogue [that] ripped into the electronic fabric not as InfoWar—but as virtual actions for real peace in the real communities of Chiapas" (1998b). Within a week of the first uprising, a massive international network of information and support was created through the most basic digital means: e-mail distribution and web pages; witness the extraordinary Internet site, *Zapatistas in Cyberspace* to grasp the scope of that network.[5] The radical disjunctures between the sophisticated presence of the Zapatistas on the Internet, at the same time that Chiapas has had none of the requisite infrastructure—in most cases, not even electricity—earned the movement its reputation as the "first postmodern revolution" (Dominguez 1998a). Thus the Zapatista's own recombinant theatre of operations meshed virtual and embodied practices in a struggle for real material change and social well-being in Chiapas.



2. Subcommandante Marcos lighting his pipe in La Realidad as he prepares to march in Mexico City, D.F. Commandante Tacho, in the background, is taking a picture of the photographer. March 2001. (Courtesy of Centro de Medios Indepen-dietes, Chiapas)

Polyspatial Embodiment

Some might understand this "recombinant" practice as a simple matter of contingency: Marcos is a superb performer who uses all forms of media with calculated savvy; his supporters around the globe use the Internet in every way possible to support his cause. Yet the on-line and off-line struggles elaborate a similar strategy of social critique and intervention based in a sophisticated use of simulation. Marcos and the Zapatistas, including the digital Zapatistas of the Electronic Disturbance Theater, rely on simulation to create a disruptive ("disturbing") presence in the material, social, and discursive contexts in which they operate. Resistance, says Dominguez—following the major theorists of information warfare—can take one of three forms: *physical*, which would engage and possibly harm the hardware itself; *syntactical* (a favorite of hackers), which would involve changing the codes by which the machine functions—programming, software, design; and finally, *semantic*, which involves engaging and undermining the discursive norms and realities of the system as a whole. Simulation operates at the level of semantic disturbance: a simulation of an airplane, made of paper or digital code, will have no effect on the federal government's physical fleet of planes or their server, nor will it affect the syntactical structure of command or the software that organizes their use; rather, the simulated airplanes disturb a semantic code, making visible the underlying and hidden relations of power on which the smooth operation of government repression depends. For Marcos, as for Dominguez, semantic resistance is an effective—and viable—form of contesting power from the margins (Dominguez 2002).

For the Zapatistas, the representative theatrical gesture is the use of the ski mask: the identical black ski masks announce an insistent, collective politicized presence, at the same time they make visible the neglected anonymity to which the indigenous peoples of Mexico's Chiapas region have been long subject. While the indigenous peoples and their degraded quality of life have long been putatively on view for centuries, it was only on donning a mask that they entered public visibility. It is, in Marcos's terms, "the mask that reveals" (Marcos 1998). The mask, then, creates what CAE would have surely called a disturbance in the normative—ethnocentric, elitist—discourses through which the indigenous communities have been

made socially invisible, and, at the same time, produces a condition in which their collective presence can be made newly legible.

Dominguez, as a digital Zapatista, engages a similar interplay of the visible and the invisible, the embodied and the simulated. When he performs in person, Dominguez wears a Zapatista mask; the presence of the mask in lecture halls, gallery spaces, and theatres signals solidarity with those in the Lacandón jungle, but as importantly, challenges any assumptions theatre or gallery viewers may have about "net.artists" and the potential uses of "new media." In this gesture, Dominguez is not unlike his fellow performance artist, Guillermo Gómez-Peña, who has engaged cyberspace as an ironic "information superhighway bandido." Like Gómez-Peña, Dominguez's digital Zapatista art contests the racist assumptions that Mexicans and Latinos are unable to develop a sophisticated relation to high technology. "The myth goes like this," writes Gómez-Peña:

> Mexicans (and other Latinos) can't handle high technology. Caught between a preindustrial past and an imposed postmodernity, we continue to be manual beings—homo fabers par excellence, imaginative artisans (not technicians)—and our understanding of the world is strictly political, poetical, or metaphysical at best, but certainly not scientific. (2001:284)

Dominguez's mask is, too, a mask that reveals racializing myths: that "authentic" natives—and perhaps especially romanticized revolutionaries imagined on horseback in rough mountain settings—are antithetical to the world of high technology or digital art. The combination of the Zapatista mask and the computer enacts the same revelatory disjunctures as did the paper airplanes or the tribal port scan: the mask is what allows the Zapatistas' presence to be made manifest even as it reveals the normative terms that govern the context in which they operate.

As a performer off-line, Dominguez plays between the supposed binaries between live presence and on-line simulation, between authoritative "scientific" knowledge and storytelling, between artist and activist. His performances most often take the form of lecture-demonstrations. In the middle of demonstrating a particular software developed for use by activists, he suddenly interrupts himself



3. Three children playing in La Realidad, one of the Zapatista Autonomous Communities in Chiapas, Mexico, March 2001. (Courtesy of Centro de Medios Independietes, Chiapas)

and runs at the audience: "Todos a la consulta!" he hollers, "Todos a la consulta!," adopting the voice of a young Tojolabal boy, Pedrito, apparently rallying all the townsfolk to a local *consulta*, or local assembly meeting. He then begins to tell a story (a practice Dominguez loosely glosses as "Mayan storytelling"), one that was originally told by Subcomandante Marcos himself:

> The village is in assembly when a military airplane from the Army Rainbow Task Force and a helicopter from the Mexican Air Force, begin a series of low flights overhead. The assembly does not stop; instead those speaking merely raise their voices. Pedrito is fed up with the menacing aircraft, and he goes, fiercely, in search of a stick inside his hut. Pedrito returns with a piece of wood, and declares: "I'm going to hit the airplane; it's bothering me." When the plane passes over Pedrito, he raises the stick and waves it furiously at the warplane. The plane then changes its course and leaves. Pedrito says "There now."
>
> We slowly move towards the stick that Pedrito left behind, and we pick it up carefully. Trying to remember what Pedrito did, I swing at the air with the stick. Suddenly the helicopter turned into a useless tin vulture, the sky became golden, and the clouds floated by like marzipan.
>
> "But it's a stick," I say.
>
> "Yes," says the Sea. "It is Mayan technology." (in Fusco 1999)

Dominguez relies on such stories as an important alternative to the usual language we have to talk about race, technology, and social change—a narrative alternative to the discourses of enlightenment, progress, and rationality that normally inform our understanding of technology. Here Dominguez doubles Marcos's practice of telling stories—of the famed Don Durito or Old Antonio—as purposeful alternatives to stagnant political discourse: Marcos issues communiqués through the voice of Don Durito of Lacandóna, a fictional beetle and anticapitalist knight errant who offers satirical social wisdom, or Old Antonio, whose poetic narratives interpret contemporary social conflict through Mayan legend. (Gómez-Peña also offers a parodic version of Mayan technology: in his collaborative performance *Naftazateca*, performed with Roberto Sifuentes, the two introduce a fictional new hardware, Technopal 2000, "a technology originally invented by the Mayans with the help of aliens from Harvard" (Gómez-Peña 2001:283). In each case, the performance is a discursive (semantic and simulated) intervention that illuminates the limits of normative discourses of knowledge and power even as they create a space for the imagination of alternatives.

Electronic Disturbance Theater's on-line performances similarly elaborate the notion of "Mayan technology" as an organizing metaphor. Here, however, the Zapatista mask is exchanged for a radical "transparency": precisely because the online context is dominated by a rhetoric of disembodiment, masking, and anonymity, Dominguez and his collaborators insist on revealing their off-line identities, and make no recourse to secrecy in planning actions against targeted sites. The World Economic Forum or the U.S. Department of Defense has ample warning and time to prepare, if needed, for a virtual "sit-in." Indeed, a recent "risk assessment" published by the National Infrastructure Protection Center (NIPC), headquartered at the Federal Bureau of Investigation, warned those associated with the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank that hacktivists might target their web sites during their meetings of September 2002. The NIPC gives its IMF and World Bank readers a lesson on hacktivism:

> Hacktivism describes the convergence of political activism and computer attacks and hacking, where "hacking" refers to illegal or unauthorized ac-

> cess to, and manipulation of, computer systems and networks. The use of hacktivism has been noted in protest activities since the Electronic Disturbance Theater endorsed a series of so-called network-direct actions against the web sites of the Mexican government in 1998. (NIPC 2002)

This little performance history and analysis by the NIPC reproduces the very rhetoric that EDT aims to undermine. The NICP is quick to see on-line protest as a variant of "hacking," which is instantly criminalized as "unauthorized" access to computer networks. In fact, on-line protest as pioneered by EDT involves no illegal use of networks: to the contrary, EDT uses the decidedly public spaces of the Internet (ports of access, reload functions) to stake the important claim that cyberspace *is* public space and should be governed by the same social and legal norms that pertain in public spaces off-line. Far from acting as secret individual operatives infiltrating the private property of others, EDT proposes a transparent, public act of protest. In this context, masking would create no meaningful disturbance in the discursive protocols of on-line interaction; transparency, in turn, enables a significant form of presence—one that is collective without anonymity, and virtual without being emptied of material concerns and realities.

This form of collective on-line presence may best be illustrated by EDT's first actions in 1998, as suggested by the NIPC, entitled Zapatista FloodNet. The artists that now form EDT were radicalized by the Acteal massacre of 45 indigenous civilians, including children, at the hands of paramilitary troops armed with U.S. drug war weapons on 22 December 1997. The first action that emerged to protest the killings and honor the dead was EDT's creation of Zapatista FloodNet, a programmed applet on the EDT web site which directed the Internet browsers of participants to targeted servers at the same time, and "flooded" those servers with thousands of automatic "reload" requests—in 1998, the web site of then-President Zedillo in Mexico; later the U.S. Defense Department, among others. Unlike hacking, and like traditional civil disobedience, FloodNet used a public space to create a politicized presence; as more people entered, FloodNet reloaded not only more times, but more quickly. FloodNet's success is measured by symbolic (semantic) efficacy, not technological (syntactical or physical) efficiency: no data was destroyed, no web page altered, and most high-capacity servers didn't even crash—but, just like the daily routines and traffic near a large street demonstration, the usual operation of the system was less functional, slowed, and possibly overwhelmed by the public action. FloodNet was thus the semantic structure through which thousands of global participants assembled to stage nonviolent protest in cyberspace.

Thus, FloodNet's goal frames an aesthetic intervention in the fluid operation of the rationalized social organization that the electronic medium presumes. FloodNet moved from sit-in to conceptual art with several of the innovations programmed into it. For the duration of the flood-performance, the automatic reload requests compelled the targeted sites to produce—to perform—a kind of electronic social revelation. In just one iteration, the FloodNet repeatedly requested nonexistent pages, with such names as "justice" or "human rights" from the Mexican government site, compelling the server to produce a steady, flashing stream of "404 error-reply" messages stating: "justice not found on this site" and "human rights not found on this site." In another iteration, FloodNet filled the site's access log with the names of people killed by Mexican government troops, in an effort to create an on-line memorial to the dead.



4. "La Lucha Sigue, Zapata Vive" (The Struggle Continues, Zapata Lives). Graffiti on a wall in San Cristóbal, Mexico, March 2001. (Courtesy of Centro de Medios Independietes, Chiapas)

Virtual Disturbance

Diana Taylor

The news hit us hard. New York University's Stern School of Business had invited Domingo Cavallo as a Distinguished Visiting Professor for 2002/03. Cavallo, ex-President of the Banco Central of Argentina during the last military dictatorship; Cavallo, ex-Minister of the Economy during Argentina's violent spin into bankruptcy; Cavallo, ex-jailbird, released from prison but not cleared of charges of arms trafficking. But, he was also Cavallo, an expert in financial matters, the Dean of the Business School maintained, and NYU business students could learn a lot from him—though they were never told who he really was. NYU had recently closed its flourishing international center, NYU-Buenos Aires, because of the financial and political crisis following the crash of the economy in December, 2001. And now it had hired the architect of the crash.

We decided to protest—students and faculty from NYU and other universities in the area. But what to do? Some of us had experience with street protest and wanted to organize a public shaming, or *escrache*, as Argentina's children of the disappeared (H.I.J.O.S.) had taught us. Others wanted to host a conference. Others wanted to stage a virtual sit-in on-line. We decided to do them all. Marsha Gall, an Argentine PhD student in Performance Studies and a fellow in the Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics took the lead. She designed a web site on the Institute's server—an "emergency activist site"—that included newspaper articles and other materials explaining our reasons for opposing Cavallo's appointment (http://hemi.nyu.edu/eng/events/index.html). Fliers with Cavallo's glaring face went up around campus and across New York. Students attended one of his public lectures and posed their questions to him. Upset, he asked if they had been sent by the C.I.A., while his wife accused them of being "commies." On a cold, rainy day, students gathered in Washington Square to publicly protest Cavallo's presence on campus. But the interesting trouble began when we started the on-line protest.

With the help of Ricardo Dominguez, founder of Electronic Disturbance Theater, we organized a virtual sit-in. Activists around the world who belong to our various networks were notified that the virtual escrache was set for 12 December and would run for 48 hours to give people a chance to participate. The excitement was building. On 12 December all of our combined e-mails would flood Stern's web site, temporarily shutting it down.

The phone call came on the morning of 11 December. The head of NYU's informational technologies services, who has long collaborated and supported the Hemispheric Institute, called to tell me the Secret Service had informed her that we were out to destroy NYU's web site. I assured her this wasn't so—we were going to target the Stern School of Business. I explained why. Protest is not terrorism, I added. OK, she said, understandingly. But how did the Secret Service know anything about our activities in the first place, I asked. She'd look into it. I called my Dean. She was doubly

shocked—first that Cavallo was at NYU; and second that the Secret Service was obviously monitoring us. She advised me to call the Provost. The head of Instructional Services called back, this time less understanding. The FloodNet attack would indeed shut down the NYU site. She reminded me that all NYU employees signed agreements on receiving Internet privileges that we would not attack the NYU site.

I received calls from various deans that day. It's simply not acceptable to use FloodNet for the virtual sit-in, I was told. It would affect all of NYU. I understood that, but observed it wasn't acceptable to bring people such as Cavallo as visiting professors. It affected all of us at NYU. Academic freedom needed to be observed, they said, and the Dean of Stern had the right to offer appointments without consulting the rest of the university, no matter how unfortunate the appointment might appear to many of us. Their understanding and good will was disarming. Everyone sympathized with the spirit of our protest, but noted that the sit-in couldn't be so disruptive. Another way of protesting would have to be worked out—a form of virtual disturbance that perhaps was more virtual than disturbing. I longed for the good old days when we simply took over a building and waited until we got thrown out.

We agreed to back off the virtual sit-in and direct all our e-mails to a special mailbox set up for the Dean of the Business School. As a compensatory gesture, I wrote him an outraged open letter. Why did we back off? Because we were afraid for our students who are not citizens of the U.S. We were afraid for the Hemispheric Institute, which relies upon the good will of NYU to function here. We were all afraid to lose our Internet access, something that did indeed happen to one of our members who had followed through with the original plan.

It's easy to rationalize our decision—our complaint was never against NYU at large but against the business school. We'd won the battle—the provost, deans, and students were all aware of the problem now. Time passed. We never knew what happened to the protest letters that ended up in that safe mailbox. The Dean of Stern answered my letter, reiterating the academic merit of Cavallo's distinguished visiting professorship. Early in January we heard that Stern was trying hard to hire another tarnished star of the economic firmament, this one also at the center of a legal and ethical firestorm.

By moments, I feel so sad. But I remind myself—we protested. We will continue to protest. Protests take time and only work over time. They involve more and more people, more and more letters, e-mails, events, and discussions. The Secret Service provides secretarial assistance, keeping the back-up files. We may not "win" our case tomorrow, but we're not about to go away.

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FloodNet enabled 10,000 calls for the dead—"Ana Hernandez is not found on this site"—to be embedded into the digital memory of the information center of their military assassins, compelling the site itself to register symbolically its complicity with their disappearance.

The transparency of the action, then, aims to reveal the "mask" that hides the workings of power and virtual capital; at the same time it enables the articulation of a politicized presence that is both collective and polyspatial. Dominguez writes, "rhizomatic power does not lurk in Virtual Capital as a rhizome, but as naked neo-imperialism." But "rhizomatic power does flow from groups like the Zapatistas who have developed distributive abilities that are not uni-directional." Thus the goal of Electronic Disturbance Theater's performed "disturbances" is to "block Virtual Capitalism's race toward weightlessness and the social consequences an immaterial ethics creates" (in Marketou 2002). The new forms of on-line collective action enabled by EDT help map an alternate geography of struggle, an alternate form of embodiment against such exploitative "weightlessness." Departing from those who see the Internet as a site of a class-less, race-less, gender-less utopian future, and also from those who see the Internet as an apocalyptic site of overwhelming hegemonic control by a techno-elite, Dominguez sees his metaphorical "Mayan technology" as a sign for a third—or fifth or seventh, he says—approach (Fusco 1999). The Internet can be used, says Dominguez, as "an ante-chamber of shared questions and spaces where perhaps this time, as the Zapatistas say, 'the apple will fall up.'" After all, this line of flight is powered by Mayan technology.

Notes

1. A "port" refers to the over 60,000 connection points on any computer available for possible connection with other computers on the Internet. While e-mail and the World Wide Web, for example, are connected through specific ports, the remaining ports are available to be "scanned" by any other system for possible connection points. ZTPS automates the process of a port scan and can be configured to carry in a message which may be logged by the targeted machine.
2. The Ars Electronica project, based in Linz, Austria, is home to an annual Festival for Art, Technology, and Society. Established in 1979, the festival has been a primary space for critical reflection and exploration of new digital cultures. The 1998 festival, Infowar, explored the changing relation of conflict to electronic media, from new formations of national security and civil resistance, to uses of digital media in war. Ars Electronica is also home to a prestigious annual prize in digital arts media, Prix Ars Electronica, as well as a "museum of the future," the Ars Electronica Center (see <http://www.aec.at/en/index.asp>).
3. On Orlan, see, among many sources, Augsburg (1998) and Faber (2002); on Stelarc, see his extensive web site, "Stelarc," at <http://www.stelarc.va.com.au/>.
4. In February and March of 2001, 24 Zapatista leaders led a "caravan" of supporters from their mountain communities to Mexico City to address the nation's congress to demand ratification of the 1996 peace agreement between the federal government and the Zapatistas. The Zapatista leaders addressed large crowds in numerous rallies and gatherings along the way; finally, on 28 March, the Zapatista delegates entered the Congress, where Comandante Esther spoke on behalf of the EZLN.
5. The site can be found at <http://www.eco.utexas.edu/faculty/Cleaver/zapsincyber.html>. Also see "Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional," <http://www.ezln.org>.

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